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ABSTRACT

Although not the preferred type of family formation, conjugal succession is now an accepted, if not expected, alternative to continuous marriage in the United States. This new trend appears to be related to a shift in the meaning of matrimony. Previously, marriage was part of a cultural pattern of transitions and as such was closely timed to movement out of the household, transition from virginity, establishment of a new household, and entrance to parenthood. Marriage has now become more voluntary, flexible, and conditional--in short, tailored to fit a less uniform and predictable life course. Evidence indicates that successful second marriages have most of the same features as successful first marriages. But if the pattern of conjugal succession has not altered marriage expectations, it certainly has changed the structure of marriage for most remarried couples. A new family form has emerged which has been called the binuclear, blended, or reconstituted family. While very little is known about how formerly married and currently married partners share the responsibility of raising children, it seems plausible that remarried couples must invent a code of etiquette for conducting relationships with others to whom they have no legal or biological ties. (In conclusion, findings of a few rare studies focusing on aspects of parenting, social relationships, and child rearing in the context of the binuclear family are summarily reported, and a current national longitudinal survey of the impact of marital disruption on children and families is briefly discussed. (Author/RH)

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Conjugal Succession and the American Kinship System

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.

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In portraying family change, sociologists easily lapse into hyperbole, frequently manufacturing myths which are in time shattered by empirical evidence. A cynical observer might conclude that this is how one generation of researchers keeps another in business, but it is perhaps fairer to view this dialectic as an expression of inherent tensions between family imagery embodying normative ideals and behavioral data which rarely display these images in perfect fashion.

Currently we are told that the traditional family is on the wane, giving way to a variety of alternative family forms. The ill-defined notion of the traditional family is generally taken to mean a simple nuclear household containing a married couple and their children. In the most orthodox version, the family cannot be designated traditional if both partners are employed or if there are fewer than two children. Why this form deserves the label "traditional" is not at all clear unless one has an appallingly short sense of history, for this family form was undoubtedly less common in previous centuries than today, although it certainly is not as prevalent today as in the preceding several decades. Both then and now, demographic, economic, and social conditions often placed constraints on the process of family formation and the maintenance of family units. Accordingly, many, if not most, children were and still are likely to spend some time living in what have come to be known as varient family forms.

In one regard, however, the contemporary family is distinctly different from any family form we have ever known in North America or in Western Europe. Until this century, divorce was a rare event, occurring only in a small proportion of marriages. Rarer still was remarriage after divorce. Step-families, of course, were not uncommon, but virtually all were constructed after death rather than divorce. Thus, parents were replaced rather than augmented and childrearing was almost never carried out by parents who were not residing together.

I do not need to tell you that this feature of our kinship system has been radically revised in recent decades. On the handout you have received, I have reproduced several summary figures documenting the changing incidence of divorce and remarriage in the United States during the twentieth century. The divorce rate has been climbing for more than a century, but divorce was not a significant cause of marital disruption until after the First World War. Among marriages begun before World War I, fewer than one in ten ended in divorce, although the official statistics conceal the true amount of marital instability by failing to record permanent separations which were often tantamount to divorce. Nonetheless, remarriage after divorce remained uncommon until the middle third of this century when divorce rates began to blimb. By mid-century, a significant proportion of marriages were legally dissolved--approximately one union in four did not survive beyond 25 years. As Figure I reveals, there was a period of quiescence in the 1950's before the divorce rate began its recent resurgence. Between 1960 and 1980, the rate of divorce rose by 241 percent. At present, more than a quarter of all marriages end in divorce after seven years; and, over a life time, half of all marriages will be dissolved by choice.

Although remarriage rates have not kept up with the pace of divorce, three out of every four divorced persons eventually remarry. Women re-couple less quickly than men because they have a more difficult time finding partners after divorce. Even so, more than half remarry within three years of their divorce. Of course, these figures are artificially inflated because divorce is sometimes delayed until remarriage is contemplated, but the propensity to remarry among divorcees is still extraordinarily high. At every age, a divorced person is more likely re-wed than is a single person to enter marriage for the first time.

No doubt, cohabitation, which is extremely common among the formerly married, will begin to slow down the pace of remarriage during the next decade; but it is unlikely that most or even a substantial proportion of divorced persons will choose to remain outside of marriage on a permanent basis. Existing surveys indicate that cohabitation is a courtship stage rather than a perferred alternative to marriage, although it is still too soon to draw any definitive conclusion about the long term effects of cohabitation on marriage rates.

In sum, life-long monagamy has become as much the exception as the rule. Although not the preferred pattern, conjugal succession is now an accepted, if not expected, alternative to continuous marriage. This new trend in family formation, I believe, is related to a profound transformation in the early part of the life course. Marriage was once part of a cultural bundle of transitions and as such was closely timed to the movement out of the household, the transition from virginity, the establishment of a new household, and the entrance to parenthood. This is no longer so true. Marriage has become a more discrete event,

independent of these other passages. Accordingly, the meaning of matrimony has shifted, becoming more voluntary, flexible, and conditional--in short, tailored to fit a less uniform and predictable life course.

Of course, other sources, as well, have reduced social commitment to life-long monogamy such as the changing status of women, the easing of divorce restrictions, and the increased emphasis on individualism, to mention but a few. I must also add that the emergence of a more conditional form of marriage is not necessarily indicative of a decline in commitment to the institution of marriage per se. Indeed, it can be argued that as marriage becomes more voluntary, the standards of what passes as a gratifying or successful marriage are elevated. In the past, married partners have required a compelling reason to dissolve their union; increasingly today, they must have a compelling reason to remain together. Couples expect more of their own marriage because they are sensitive to the general cultural expectations of what a good marriage should be.

In remarrying, individuals seek to upgrade their conjugal situation. Evidence suggests that roughly the same proportion of second marriers remain together as first marriers. This might suggest that the dynamics of first and second marriages are not very different. The available evidence, which is remarkably slim, reveals that remarriers experience marriage quite differently. They profess, for example, to marry less because of social pressure, to accord less importance to romantic love, and to be less willing to remain in an ungratifying relationship. Nonetheless, evidence also indicates that successful second marriages have most of the same features as successful first marriages. In sum,

the style of second marriages is probably determined more by the fit of the partners than by a divorgent set of conjugal expectations. Remarriers display a strong commitment to the central features of a companionate relationship: a willingness to communicate openly, to share decisions, to compromise in disagreements, and to provide space for individual growth and expression.

But if the pattern of conjugal succession has not altered marriage expectations, it certainly has changed the structure of marriage for most remarried couples. As Paul Bohannon has observed, couples with children can never completely divorce, for they remain linked through their common responsibilities as parents. In the past, probably most males disappeared after divorce or were displaced by a step-parent who recreated the nuclear household. A greater proportion of fathers are now willing and even eager to share childcare, if not actual custody. The result is a new family form which has been called the binuclear, blended, or reconstituted family.

Very little is known about how formerly married and currently married partners share the responsibility of raising children. Andrew Cherlin has hypothesized that the absence of any clear-cut guidelines regulating the reconstituted family produces great strain on the marital relationship among remarried couples. Although existing evidence bearing on Cherlin's thesis is somewhat contradictory, it seems plausible that couples must invent a code of etiquette for remarriage. Based on a number of qualitative case studies and a small survey, I have discovered abundant evidence that remarried persons with children have to deal with the potential intrusion of the ex-spouse. A multitude of

patterns for handling this situation emerged ranging from relatively close alliances to complete social segregation between former and current partners.

Strict segregation between formerly and currently married partners is not generally practical when childrearing is shared across households. Some couples, albeit probably a small minority, are enormously inventive in developing viable patterns of co-parenting which insure the child's access to both residential and nonresidential parents and step-parents. In such cases, a new type of extended family has emerged, which is built upon what Paul Bohannon labeled a "divorce chain" but which in fact is really a remarriage chain."

We have no accurate data on the number of families of this type since we do not know how often parents continue to share responsibility for childrearing after they divorce and remarry. Elsewhere, I have estimated that at least one child in four will have at least one step-parent by the time he or she reaches the age of eighteen. In a current study, sponsored by NIMH and the Foundation for Child Development, my collaborators, Nick Zill and Jim Peterson, and I are collecting more precise data on how the child's contact with parent figures is altered by divorce and remarriage and the consequences of various parenting arrangements for the social and psychological well-being of the child.

On the basis of a pilot study carried out in Centre County, Pennsylvania, it seems likely that most children forfeit a good deal of contact with the nonresidentidal parent, probably in no small measure because the formerly married couple cannot work out a viable plan for his or her participation. The findings revealed vastly disparate

perceptions by the two parents about their commitment to co-parenting, the degree of childrearing responsibility assumed, and the quality of relationship between the child and the outside parent. The great majority of non-custodial parents expressed a desire to assume more childrearing responsibility but felt locked out and excluded, while custodial parents often described their former partners as shirking responsibility and being unwilling to retain their parental obligations.

One way of interpreting these findings is to see that divorce typically divides two features of parenthood that are usually fused together: the biological role and the sociological role. Outside parents are likely to believe that their biological connection to the child provides a basis for a continuing relationship even though they may acknowledge some failure in not living up to their social responsibilities to provide for the child. Residential parents are inclined to sense the decline in the sociological aspect of parenthood and deny the biologically-based claims of the outside parent.

Remarriage often complicates the situation further by introducing a new sociological parent. If the biological parent senses that he is being replaced, he may either escalate the level of conflict or withdraw completely. Seen from the step-parent's perspective, the choice may be either to compete with the biological parent for the child's loyalty and affection or to occupy a sideline position.

Some families seem to be able to avoid this dilemma by widening their conception of parenthood. Interestingly enough, most children have little problem in having more than one daddy or mommy, but parents frequently resist the notion that parenthood can involve more than two

players. Some observers have suggested that if we only had terminology for all parties, the problem would subside. But unless our model of parenthood is modified to permit members greater than two, it seems unlikely that coining new terms will do much to clarify the situation.

Curiously, when we move beyond the nuclear family, accommodating to divorce and remarriage by expanding the kinship network is not as difficult. While divorce generally attenuates a parent's relationship to his or her former in-laws, to a surprising extent, children manage to retain relationships with their grandparents on the side of their non-custodial parent. Although contact clearly diminished to some degree, almost all children in the Centre County Study continued to see the parents, and usually the siblings, of their outside parent at least occasionally during the year and many saw them more often than that.

In the qualitative case studies, parents were usually quick to point out that they had no interest in disrupting the cild's ties with their ex-spouse's family, even when they had nothing good to say about their former partner. An overwhelming majority in the survey indicated that although they did not necessarily consider their former in-laws still to be their relatives, they remained nonetheless their children's relatives. Parents recognized that it was in the child's best interest to maintain relationships with extended kin who might offer emotional support and material resources in later life.

Children's contacts with the extended kin of their outside parents remained the same whether or not they remarried (remained?). But remarriage ultimately expanded the pool of kin because children acquire new grandparents,

uncles, aunts, and cousins through their step-parents. In the Centre Pennsylvania study, only one-sixth of the respondents mentioned that their children had any difficulty in becoming assimilated into their current spouse's family. The qualitative case studies revealed that most relatives made special efforts to display affection to children brought into the family as a way of demonstrating solidarity with their kinsperson.

This did not mean that invidious distinctions were not sometimes made between "step" and "real" relatives, but such instances were more the exception than the rule. In general, kin seemed to be willing to overlook these distinctions, and children in turn rarely referred to relatives on their step-parents side as "step-grandparents" or "step-uncles." The model of extended kin permits augmentation. Accordingly, the amount of contact children had with one side of the family was unrelated to their contact with other sides. The principle seemed to be one of parity for all kinship lines rather than a zero-sum arrangement.

Remarriage, therefore, has the effect of enlarging the child's kinship network. In the face of declining fertility, it might be said that our marriage system is creating a larger pool of relatives for a shrinking number of children. The contemporary American family is being extended as much by serial marriage as by generations reproducing themselves.

What does the restructuring of the kinship system mean for the welfare of the children, which after all, is the most important consideration? Many would argue that more is not necessarily better. It is entirely

possible that the addition of new parents and extended kin places the child in a confusing and ambiguous emotional world, where his relations with his close kin are diluted if not completely attenuated.

Much of the existing evidence about the long-term effects of divorce and remarriage on the socialization process is either badly out of date, or based on very limited and nonrepresentative samples, using cross-sectional rather than longitudinal designs. Some of the better studies have examined the effect of divorce on childhood development, but have not looked at the remarriage process. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that researchers have not come to any consensus on the conditions under which divorce and remarriage alter the child's course of development and chances in later life.

With both governmental and private foundation support, a national longitudinal survey on the impact of marital disruption on children and families was launched last year. Data from a representative sample of some 1,300 children and their parents are being collected this summer. The participants in this study were first interviewed in 1976, when the children were ages 7 to 11. More than a third of the sample will have lived in families broken by separation or divorce by the time they are followed-up, nearly five years after the initial interview, and nearly a fifth will have acquired a new parent through remarriage or cohabitation.

Extensive data are being collected from the parents about their family life, marital situation, adaptation to divorce and remarriage, when these events occurred, and childrearing practices, along with observations of the child's development and personal adjustment.

Parallel as well as complementary information is being collected from the subject children, and data on the child's performance in school is being obtained from teachers' reports and school records.

A major aim of the National Survey of Children is to contrast children in families where parents are stably married with those in which parents change their marital situation during the course of the study. The NSC data will permit us to address many of the questions raised in thie brief review, such as how parents divide the responsibilities of childrearing after divorce, how subsequent remarriage alters this division of labor, and what the consequences are for the child's growth and development. Information from the NSC will also allow us to explore the changing role of the extended family after divorce and remarriage.

It is common practice to end a talk calling for further research. In this case, I can at least promise that, in the next several years, more conclusive results will be forthcoming on many of the issues raised in this talk. However, even in the absence of more specific findings, one major conclusion is already warranted. Divorce and remarriage can no longer be considered an anomolous feature of our kinship system. Conjugal succession has become an intrinsic part of our system of family formation.